

VZCZCXRO4526
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #1583/01 1341508
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 141508Z MAY 07
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1148
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 001583

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/14/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: POLITICS AND VIOLENCE IN IRAQ'S NINE SOUTHERN PROVINCES

Classified By: Political Counselor Margaret Scobey for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This cable was drafted by PRT Muthanna IPAO and PRT Najaf IPAO and reviewed by PRT team leaders or REO director from all provinces covered.

Summary

[1](#)2. (S) This cable is a comparative overview of the drivers of political competition and violence across the nine Shia-majority provinces of southern Iraq based on PRT and REO reporting. A high degree of differentiation exists among these provinces. Political agreement has kept violence to a minimum in Najaf and Karbala (at least until recently), and tribal influence has done the same in Muthanna, Dhi Qar, and Wasit. In contrast, sectarian fighting in Babil, and intra-Shia militia clashes in Basrah, Maysan, and Diwaniyah, make these four provinces chronically violent. National parties have varying degrees of control over their provincial members; party affiliation is often based primarily on personal networks and patronage. SCIRI and Badr in Muthanna, Dhi Qar, Basrah, and Maysan operate largely independent of central control, as do Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) factions in Basrah, Maysan, Muthanna, Dhi Qar, Diwaniyah, and Wasit. Iranian influence exists to some degree in all the southern provinces, but it is most concentrated in Najaf, Karbala, Basrah, Maysan, and Babil. Post will continue to examine the implications of this analysis for U.S. goals in the center and south. End Summary.

Muthanna

[1](#)3. (S) The struggle for power between the leadership of the provincial government and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) on the one hand, and the JAM militia on the other, dominates politics in Muthanna. Governor Hassani (SCIRI/Badr) and a coalition of political opportunists on the Provincial Council seek to amass power by controlling the organs and processes of government, such as reconstruction funding, ministerial provision of services, and selection into the ISF. The influence and money won through this control allows them to expand their personal networks of patronage. JAM, on the other hand, seeks power through intimidation, street power, and extra-legal violence. Their methods threaten the stability of the province, antagonize the tribes and the tribal sheikhs, and earn them the enmity of the populace. Where the provincial political leadership is pragmatic and willing to play within the rules of a democratically-shaped system, JAM has a radical agenda pursued through brute force. Finally, leaders of the Iraqi Army and Police in Muthanna have proven to be professional, loyal to the government, and aggressive in their pursuit of JAM. Their successes in recent clashes with JAM have elicited a groundswell of

popular, tribal, and governmental support. This groundswell can be maintained by supporting provincial leaders and tribal sheikhs through resources, capacity building, and development assistance.

Dhi Qar

14. (S) Politics in Dhi Qar operate on two levels. Within the provincial government SCIRI, Fadhila, and Da'wa compete in a forced "coalition" for control of budgets, reconstruction, ministries, and the security forces. OMS and JAM operate outside the provincial government and seek power through militancy, intimidation, the provision of services, and a populist/nationalist platform of anti-Coalition rhetoric and violence. Party labels and affiliations, however, function more as banners for leading individuals and their personal networks of patronage and support, than as ideological organizations. Loyalties are personal, tribal, and fiduciary rather than programmatic. This is a result of the second, sub-surface layer of Dhi Qar politics which is tribal and personal. All the chief political players in Dhi Qar are connected by a web of past interactions and tribal affiliations. As in its sister province of Muthanna, this web of relations and the predominantly rural environment make Dhi Qar politics parochial rather than national (although some politicians, such as the Governor, do have national connections). The entire variegated mixture of militias, political parties, and tribes sits in uneasy and punctuated equilibrium, where competition is long-term and incremental instead of zero-sum and absolutist; no single faction aims to wipe out its rivals. Outbreaks of violence among factions are simply precursors to negotiations and a new round of

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bargaining conducted in the traditional tribal mode.

15. (S) JAM presence in Dhi Qar is strong, though it is concentrated in and around the urban centers of Nasiriyah and Suq ash-Shuyukh. Its core support comes from disenfranchised males who seek the power, employment, and meaning given to them by JAM's militancy. However, JAM's violence towards fellow Iraqis has alienated much of the rest of the populace, and JAM is consequently attempting to refocus on anti-coalition militancy and the provision of services (following the Lebanese Hezbollah model). The provincial government's ability to deliver essential services, including security and the rule of law, is therefore the most critical variable in whether JAM's influence in Dhi Qar will wax or wane. Unfortunately the government's ability has proved limited to date in this regard.

Basrah

16. (S) The enormous economic flows channeled through Basrah raise the stakes of political competition and drive intense factionalization and violence in the province. The province's oil and gas fields, refining, power generation, commerce, agriculture, and smuggling industries are the economic prizes fought over by those seeking to finance their way to power. Governor Wa'ili of Fadhila is a kleptocrat and wields the Oil Protection Force as his personal militia. He finances his operations through oil smuggling, and with his brother, maintains firm control over the Basrah Fadhila party. Following an assassination attempt in October 2006, the Governor has become ever more willing to cooperate with the Coalition. The rest of the Shiite parties in Basrah are relatively independent of any centralized, national control. This includes SCIRI and Badr in Basrah, who even compete against one another for resources and leadership, and it is particularly true of Basrah JAM, which has spun out of Muqtada al-Sadr's control and is internally fragmented. Iranian influence and support) cash, weapons, and training

) is ever increasing. It has contributed to the splintering and proliferation of Shiite militias in Basrah, fueling the independence of Badr, factions within JAM, Thar Allah, Harakat Hezbollah, Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Da'wa.

17. (S) Militant JAM is the main culprit in the province's violence and lawlessness, much of which is directed at the Coalition. The recent withdrawal of Fadhila from the Shi'a coalition has also prompted a spike in political violence as Fadhila's competitors have upped their efforts to oust the Governor. The Iraqi police (IPS) is infested with JAM and other militia members. The provincial government and security officials are complicit in much of the militia activity and corruption is endemic. The province as a whole, and its power brokers in particular, resent Baghdad. The few bright spots in Basrah are the professional Commander of the Iraqi Army's (IA's) 10th Division; the moderate group of politicians, social leaders, tribal sheikhs, some of whom have formed the non-aligned "Gathering to Save Basrah" bloc; and the steady growth of an Internal Affairs unit within the police designed to root out and prosecute death squad members from the IPS.

Maysan

18. (S) Maysan's tradition of fierce Marsh Arab resistance to outside control and its longstanding relationships with Iran in smuggling, paramilitary training, and financial support make the province uniquely volatile. The political factions present include Badr, SCIRI, OMS, Iraqi Hezbollah, Da'wa Tanzim, and a number of strong tribal groupings. The governor and 15 of the 41 provincial council members are Sadrists, making Maysan the only province with elected Sadrists dominating a provincial level government. JAM has steadily expanded its grip on the province by infiltrating the lower ranks of the IPS, expanding the scope of its extra-legal sharia courts, and mobilizing bands of self-styled morality police. The majority of the Sadrist political leaders and militants are judged to be beyond Muqtada al-Sadr's control. Their growing power has been partially checked by Badr, many members of which have been installed in the upper ranks of the IPS, and by some of the tribes. Both of these elements clashed with JAM in the Amara violence of 20 October 2006. Maysan JAM remains virulently anti-CF and drew strength from its claimed "eviction" of British forces from Camp Abu Naji.

Wasit

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19. (S) Wasit province has a rural dynamic, where party affiliation often means less than personal ties. Politicians are pragmatic and genuinely concerned about their constituency. Cooperation between individuals and parties that would be impossible in more politically polarized provinces occurs routinely in Wasit. Recent exploration by OMS and Iraqi National Accord (INA) of forming a unified bloc is a case in point. Currently, SCIRI and Da'wa hold a majority of the seats on the Provincial Council, while OMS has a large presence on the local councils. JAM possesses significant street power, and has deeply infiltrated the Iraqi Army and Police. Sadrists will likely do well in the next provincial elections. But the degree of centralized control that Muqtada al-Sadr has over those politicians and militiamen nominally acting under his banner in Wasit is unclear. Finally, the province is a major conduit for Iranian goods and activities, both overt and covert, into Iraq, including EFPs and other weapons, intelligence assets, and transiting militia trainers and trainees. Shiite militias are well-stocked and attack CF regularly, but there is little intra-Shia violence. Instead, Shiite militias such

as JAM and Badr have cooperated in attacking Sunnis concentrated in the northern portion of the province.

Babil

¶10. (S) Babil's location on the periphery of Baghdad, its mixed Sunni-Shia population, and its status as a key node in the transport and fuel network have made it a sectarian battleground. The Sunni population in the north, disenfranchised by their electoral boycott, face coordinated attempts to drive them from the province by SCIRI's paramilitary popular committees, and Badr and JAM militias. The IA and the IPS have several strong and non-sectarian commanders, but are hamstrung by the aggressively sectarian Shia political leadership of the province and by creeping militia infiltration of their ranks. The Sunni population, therefore, has begun to arm itself and to welcome Sunni extremist groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq into its neighborhoods.

¶11. (S) SCIRI dominates the Babil government, enjoys heavy Iranian support, and is centrally controlled by the party's Baghdad leadership. Its strategy for controlling the province, founded on entrenching itself at the top of provincial political and security institutions, buying its way to electoral victory, and coercing the populace with its armed "popular committees," mimics the authoritarian model of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran. Sadrists and the Da'wa party have aligned on a nationalist platform and, together with a local group led by Sayyid Rasool, a cleric with ties to Ayatollah Sistani, form the principal Shiite opposition to SCIRI. JAM's presence and influence in Babil has been limited, but it is growing. The poor state of the Babil economy and the government's deficiency in providing essential services helps fuel this JAM growth, while at the same time increasing Babil's dependence on Iranian supplies of goods and services, e.g. fuel and communications.

Najaf

¶12. (S) Najaf is the single most important center of Shiite political and religious power in Iraq. Its vital significance for all sides has encouraged the growth of efficient government service delivery and massive reconstruction. Najafi politics, however, are dominated by OMS/JAM and SCIRI/Badr and the rivalry between the two. Unlike in other outlying provinces, the political and military wings of the Sadr movement and, separately, SCIRI function in unison, are centrally controlled, and command the exclusive loyalty of their members. Meanwhile, the tribes in and around Najaf have been marginalized. The parties have reached a mutual agreement that open violence in the holy city would be too volatile, and therefore all sides work to contain it, though targeted assassinations still occur. But Badr and JAM have divided the ISF ranks between them, and there exists the potential for a creeping militarization of the province through the growth of "popular committees" (so far unarmed) comprised of neighborhood loyalists of the various factions. Any faction's loss of power at the ballot box will likely be resisted by arms on the street.

¶13. (S) Iranian influence in Najaf is deep and complex. The Iranians channel cash to the various Shiite factions and have invested heavily in Najafi real-estate and infrastructure. Iranian intelligence forces exploit their network of ties, most prominently with Najaf's Badr Corps Deputy Governor,

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Abdul Hussein Abtan, who is reported to be a Quds Force agent. On a more personal level, many Najafi families have relatives in Iran, and many Shiite students and clerics are of Iranian origin.

Karbala

¶14. (S) Similar to Najaf, Karbala is one of the holy cities of Shiite Islam and a political center where competing factions have, at least until recently, agreed to limit violence. While Karbala's inherent desire to assert its independence of Najaf could lead to the development of local groups in the future, the province remains politically contested by the three key parties in the Shi'a coalition: SCIRI, OMS, and Dawa. OMS once backed the Dawa governor as a counterbalance to SCIRI, but a series of assassination attempts and other incidents suggest that OMS and JAM are turning against the provincial government and becoming more militant. Popular confidence in the government is declining because of security problems, including two mass-casualty car bombs in April, and shortages of fuel and food. Iranian money, pilgrims, clerics, and religious students have visited Karbala for centuries because it contains the shrines of Imam Husayn and Abbas and is a center of Shiite learning and authority. These flows have become floods since 2003 and Iranian influence, legitimate and otherwise, is entrenched in Karbala.

Diwaniyah

¶15. (S) Diwanyah has become a militia battleground. SCIRI controls most organs of the government and manipulates the political and judicial system against its opponents, especially JAM. Meanwhile, JAM has primacy on the ground and wages a running campaign against uncooperative ISF members, though it has not sought to transfer its militia strength into political power. Supporters of the radical cleric al-Sarkhi, as well as feuding tribal elements, contribute to the overall atmosphere of violence. The governor, Khaleel Hamza, is weak and ineffectual, reconstruction in the province has all but halted, and the needs of the people are largely ignored by the government. The Baghdad and Najaf leaderships of SCIRI and Badr exert substantial control over their wings in Diwaniyah, but Muqtada al-Sadr has difficulty reigning in the various JAM elements that operate in the province. The USG has little visibility on Iranian influence in Diwaniyah, but that which is detected seems to be the indirect provision of funds and militia materiel.
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